

Choreography & Intermedia Performance through Travel & Feminist Perspectives

A Senior Honors Research Arts Distinction Paper

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CONSTRUCTION/DECONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE BODY

By simply placing three female bodies on stage, I literally danced the subject of the female body. Ann Cooper Albright writes, “Their bodies are always on display and yet often they are never in control of the terms of that representation” (Albright 120). I used three female dancers, clothed them in feminine dresses, and told the audience to watch them. I utilized their already female bodies in the construction of dancing the female body in my work.

Compositionally, I use repetition, physical positioning of body parts, costume choices and positioning of the camera to construct and deconstruct the female body.

In the beginning of my rehearsal process, I became interested in transposing my observations of the system of patriarchy into my own movement vocabulary. Many of my movement choices were inspired by the manipulation of the choices made over the female body in politics. 50% of the United States population is women, and yet there are only 76 women in Congress out of 435 (Nation). It is amazing to think about what bodies make decisions for other bodies, and that literally half of a population can be so underrepresented in the Congress of The United States. The puppet and marionette section came out of my frustrations with these statistics, because I often feel like politicians tug on all of these strings with no idea or care that those strings might be attached to a person at the end of them.

I am very aware of the fact that I did not have a male dancer pull the strings, hold the camera, or move their bodies into various positions, because I wanted to avoid getting overly literal, but I also strongly believe women take part in perpetuating patriarchal systems. I am in a Chicana Feminist class this semester, and we read “La Prieta” by Gloria Anzaldua. She writes:

I see Third World peoples and women not as oppressors but as accomplices to oppression by unwittingly passing on to our children and our friends the oppressor's ideologies. I cannot discount the role I play as accomplice, that we all play as accomplices, for we are not screaming loud enough in protest.

Every time I cross my legs to make myself smaller, shy away from speaking up in class, let men shout harassments at me on the street without contesting, or put on lipstick and high heels, I am participating in the overarching oppressive system of patriarchy. I think almost everyone participates in this implemented system because it is all we know. There are people who deliberately refute the system, but they generally do because they have received thorough education. This within itself suggests a deeper systemic issue, that only people with access to higher education are able to contest the patriarchal system. In general, women, not men, are the editors of Vogue and Instyle magazine. Women, not men, continue to dance around male rappers in music videos who are singing objectifying, offensive lyrics about women's bodies. My piece, however small it may be, is my own embodied social protest to these threads of manipulation and control throughout our culture.

Repetition and the dancer's physical manipulation of each other are two choreographic choices I made to emphasize the construction/deconstruction of the female body. In the second section in my dance, Anna moves in a circle around the stage, pauses, and then Kelly and Alice swiftly arrange her into what I call the ballerina music box position. They repeat this three times to emphasize the literal manipulation the dancers do to one another. Another example in the piece is when Anna and Alice drag Kelly to the back corner and Alice touches Kelly's face while Anna holds a camera over her head. Alice manipulates Kelly's face, a moment that is suggestive of the obsession our culture has with examining the female body. When the dancers move in

unison at the end of the piece, they do the phrase three times, tiring more and more, symbolically experiencing the relentlessness of the patriarchal systems that are embedded in our day to day lives.

I also portrayed the spectrum of feminine ideologies through my costume choice. The dancers wore 1960s mod dresses (that coincidentally also looked Super Hero-like) with black blazers. The costumes portray this dichotomous spectrum of the woman we know today- the working girl/power suit woman, and the very feminine/objectified woman. My piece does not resolve anything, or answer any questions, which is reflective in the costume choices. Women today have more opportunities than they did sixty years ago; they are CEO's, Secretaries of State, and Supreme Court Justices, yet they are still scrutinized for their appearance. Even Barack Obama, a liberal president, slipped in his progressive views when he told Attorney General Kamala Harris she was "the best looking attorney general" a few weeks ago. I aimed to make my piece raise more questions than answers about the female body, because the image of the modern women is a fluid, ever evolving one that is still weighed down by traditional patriarchal ideologies.

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

To be completely honest, I had no intentions of using technology when I was first planning my senior project; I blame it on the swing space. I did not want to do a site piece, and I selfishlessly wanted lights and a formal stage with chairs the audience could sit in for my final project at Ohio State. I told myself last year that I had to suck it up and take Dance Film and Intermedia and Performance if I wanted the lights, chairs and stage that the EMMA lab could provide. I am so glad I did, because Dance Film and Intermedia were two of the most influential

courses I took while at Ohio State. The live feed aspect of my piece came into fruition towards the middle of the autumn semester, and then developed into a more cohesive idea when I started my EMMA rehearsals in January. The more I played with live feed, the more I became fascinated with how the camera angles affected the way the audience viewed the dancers (and at times themselves).

I had been working with the puppet imagery in my rehearsals using two chairs for my dancers to stand on while Alice, the puppet, stood beneath them connected by a web of string. I thought it was be interesting to portray the relationship between the marionette and the manipulator in a compelling, revealing way, because as I mentioned earlier, the marionette idea stems from my feelings about political/patriarchal structures. For my final showing in Intermedia and Performance, I showed a version of what would become the opening section of my piece with the puppet and live feed footage of Kelly behind the screen. I went through many versions of the puppet, and I remember first using a much smaller projection screen for Kelly to stand behind. I then recognized the need for a larger screen, so I tried using the Rear Projector (RP) Screen that eventually made its way into my final piece. Norah encouraged us to partake in the trial and error process of figuring out what worked and what did not work. I spent hours with my dancers in rehearsal placing them in various positions and looking at different angles to film the dancers from and what screens to project images on. I went to EMMA once a week to just work with Oded, who generously stood in for my dancers as a body for me to look at different arrangements of the projections and camera angles. I probably spent an entire two hours having Anna (the camera operator) try filming Kelly from below to make her seem more powerful, from above while standing on a ladder to make Kelly seem less powerful, and also zooming in and out on Kelly's face from various angles. I learned that the best way to figure out what works is to

simply try a million different things, and to not to be discouraged when what I thought would work in my head actually did not work in reality. Through my trial and error process, I noticed that the only technology integrations I tried that were compelling were the moments I was revealing something or giving the audience a new vantage point that they could not see otherwise. This is why the puppet imagery, the examining of Kelly's face section, and the very end were the three Intermedia sections I incorporated into my piece.

One of the first things I learned in Intermedia and Performance was that when using technology, everything takes much longer to visually process. This is especially true when using live feed, because it takes a while for the images of the camera feed to register for the audience. By using live feed, I could visually manipulate what the audience saw or did not see. I wanted to create mystery with the live feed, but also had to be conscious of the time it took for the audience to process what was happening with the live feed. In the beginning of my piece, the audience only sees Alice being pulled (and pulling) on ropes. I then used a spotlight to show a shadow in the downstage right corner. It is confusing to watch because one might think it is Alice's shadow, but when watched carefully, the shadow is doing the opposite pulling movements of Alice. This was an exciting moment for me as a choreographer to create a sense of confusion and dissonance for the audience. When Anna turns on the camera to reveal Kelly's face, I finally expose the "answer" to the puzzle. Kelly serves as an "Oz-like" character, or the person behind the screen calling the shots. The technology allowed me to play with the timing and pacing of the reveals, because I did not want to expose everything at the beginning, but rather keep the audience wanting more. The live feed and use of technology gave me the power to dictate the audience's vantage point, which is something I would not have been able to do had I not used technology.

My camera and live feed integrations were also heavily influenced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's theory of "The Male Gaze." In her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she asserts that in film, women are for "visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey). The camera in my piece is representative of this voyeuristic gaze that media has on the female body. It exposes the dancers as well as the audience, making them uncomfortably aware of themselves in the piece. In the section where Alice manipulates Kelly's face underneath the camera, I ask the audience to witness multiple gazes: Alice's direct and physical gaze on Kelly's face, Anna's gaze through the camera, and Kelly's vulnerable, non-direct gaze on the projection screen. I like this tension, because it convolutes the role of the gaze in the piece, similarly to the complexity gaze plays in society and contemporary media. I would not have been able to create this tension if I had not used the technological component of the live feed.

In terms of actually working with technology, I would probably tell people to run away. I never had a rehearsal where all of the technology magically worked. There was always some kind of issue with the camera, projector, live feed, Isadora software, and the list could go on. Oded was a Godsend, because he has the most unbelievable patience when it comes to troubleshooting and taking the time to figure out the source of the problem. Through this process of working with the diva that is technology, I quickly learned the insurmountable difficulty of making a choreographed, intermediated work. I had to simultaneously run the lights, play the sound, give Oded the Isadora cues, coach and direct the dancers, and figure out why a screen wasn't working- all while trying to actually watch the piece. I learned so much about how to trouble shoot and problem solve technology problems. I also learned when to simply let go, stop fidgeting with the non-working projector, and move on in the rehearsal if something was not working properly. Ironically, enough the small projector that I used in my

piece did not work two out of three nights during the performance weekend. This problem had never happened before, but I learned that it is all a part of the game that is Intermedia.

The most salient point I learned through this process of working with Intermedia is that when only choreographing with dancers, I only had to think about constructing space and time. When I added in technology, I also became a visual artist that had to think about the entire visual effect and flow of the work. The audience saw a visual composition as soon as they walk into the EMMA space. I tried to make a clean tri-projector affect, with one small, medium and large projector. The placement of these projectors is crucial to the overall effect of the work, and this is something I had never had to think about prior to this project. Through this process, I also developed a sense of when and where to utilize technology. Norah Zuniga-Shaw told me she appreciated the economy of usage of technology in my piece, which I appreciate because I only wanted to use the live feed when it was absolutely necessary. I think Intermediated work can have a tendency to get a little overwhelming if the artist is just using technology for the effect, and not for a purpose.

My music collaboration was also informative to my overall growth as an artist. Michael Wall kindly agreed to create an original score for my piece. When I asked him in February, his immediate reaction was “oh, it’s not until April we have so much time!” As the choreographer, I did not share that similar mentality. My thought process was more like, “ah! We have two months there’s not enough time!” This really exemplifies the difference in the musician/dancer mindset. Michael and I talked on the phone about scheduling, getting ideas together, and small changes that I would like to make to score. I emailed him some videos of my rehearsals so he could get a sense of the movement and atmosphere I was going for. He then sent me his preliminary draft and I asked him to tweak minor things so that the dance synced up with the

music. The end of the score was much fast than I had been rehearsing with my dancers, but I made them do to that tempo anyways and I am so glad I did because the fast pace of the unison section was what made it so compelling. I probably butchered a lot of musical terms, but Michael never made me feel like I did not know what I was talking about. I received the score a little later than I probably would have liked (in terms of rehearsing with it), but at the end of the day, everything fell into place. I am just happy to have such a skilled musician like Michael willing to work with me, even as I stumbled through trying to speak eloquently about music.

MY GENDERED/RACIALIZED JOURNEY

The white female body is the most emphasized female body in media. Most female roles in television, music, advertising, and even in the dance world (in The United States) are white women. In terms of my own gendered/racialized journey, I knew I was white from a very early age because I had an African American nanny named Justine that I remember noticing had a different skin color than I did. My dad lived in Atlanta because he was finishing his doctorate, and my mom worked long hours as a nurse practitioner at an inner city clinic, so most of my early childhood memories involve Justine. I used to walk her to the corner of my driveway every afternoon as she walked further down the street to the bus stop. She was the only person I knew that did not drive a car, but rode the bus. In my child-brain schema, I associated African Americans with being the people that took the bus. I of course had no idea why or what those associations might possibly mean, but every since my young relationship with Justine, I have been curious in how identity and intersectionality affect how individuals experience the world.

My coursework in Gender studies has forever shifted how I observe the world and the people around me. I can hardly ever walk by a person of a different race/gender/sexuality and

not wonder in my head, “how are they perceiving me? What were my initial judgments of this person?” My grounding in feminist theory greatly influenced my desire to travel to Burkina Faso, and to push me out of my comfort zone and give me new cultural experiences. Feminists, like dancers and choreographers, employ embodied and situational knowledge to inform their work, whether it is in academic theory or choreography. Chicana feminist Donna Haraway writes about situational knowledge, or the strategy “to produce maps of consciousness for people who have been inscribed within the marked categories of race and sex that have been so exuberantly produced in the histories of masculinist, racist, and colonialist dominations” (Chicana Feminist Narratives). Our race, sex, gender and class all affect how we experience and interpret the world, and my recent trip to Burkina Faso truly affected how I utilized personal experience to influence my work.

My trip to Burkina Faso was an enlightening experience that significantly affected the way I see the world and what kind of citizen I want to be in the world. In Burkina Faso, I was living in a racial minority for the first time in my life, and I was really taken aback by how discomforted I became with my own body image. I wanted to have dark skin, weigh more, and wrap my hair in beautiful fabric like the Burkinabe women did. I actually felt what African American feminists like Audre Lorde and bell hooks write in their essays about young African American girls not being comfortable with their appearance and wanting to look white. It was remarkable to physically experience this change of perspective towards my own body. Because I clearly stood out among Burkinabes, I always felt like I was on display. In reality, they probably could have cared less about a white woman walking around their streets, but this was such a new environment for me that I was always hyper-aware of my different physical appearance. I thought a lot about this hyper-awareness when I was working with the live feed of the camera for

the first time. When in Burkina Faso, I made myself rehearse in the studio nightly to physically embody the thoughts, feelings and conversations I had throughout the day. I went through my journal and circled words that stood out to me like “mosquito,” “heat,” and “moto” to develop movement ideas. All of these gestures made their way into what would become the final “unison phrase” in my piece. This was such a new approach for me to make movement, and I loved taking these very simple words like “heat” and abstracting them into gestures.

During the rehearsal process with my dancers, I was able to develop my eye as a director and choreographer. I would spend about an hour by myself before every rehearsal just lying on a floor and trying to visualize the piece. I learned the importance of meditating with the work and giving myself time to just sit with my ideas. When it came time to work with the dancers, I already had a general idea of what I wanted to try doing in that rehearsal. I also allowed my curiosity to take over if something the dancers did sparked my interest. Dancers often joke around in rehearsal, and my dancers quickly learned that if they do something interesting in a passing joke, I might exploit it and transpose it into actual choreography. As a choreographer, I am really drawn to making fast, unique, and rhythmically driven movement. When I make and see movement, I also sing a little song that creates a dynamic rhythm for the phrase. After the performance on Thursday Susan Hadley commended me for this, because she observed that contemporary dancers often like to move at a legato, medium speed, as opposed to a fast, rhythmic pace. I always pushed the dancers to move swiftly through motions, while also giving every movement a qualitative period.

Being in a rehearsal process with Noa Zuk and Ohad Fishof greatly influenced how I observe and coach my dancers. Zuk and Fishof always made small changes and tweaks to everything, never settling and getting comfortable with any of the choreography. I gave my

dancers notes the week of the show, and even changed things in between performances because new things kept inspiring me. Unlike visual art, dance is an ever changing, fluid art form, and the changes we make as choreographers also keeps the movement and performance fresh for the dancers.

I received wonderful feedback from all kinds of people, but then again no one is going to tell me things they did not like to my face! Most people thought Alice was pulling herself on the ropes in the beginning of the piece, which was exciting for me to hear because that meant Kelly's reveal on the camera was successful. Leigh Lotocki, an alumni of the Department that I admire greatly, told me she had never seen anything like it before and called me an "objective choreographer." I was not entirely sure what she meant by this but then AJ Blankenship told also told me something along those lines. I thought about this for a while and realized that this is absolutely true. Up until a week before the show I kept making different sections and then went through all of them very objectively and pieced together parts that I thought were interesting to watch. I had no problems with cutting things out of my piece, even the sections that I had kept since the beginning of my process. I think it is important to detach oneself from the work and to look at it almost scientifically. Vickie Blaine told me, "I saw progress," and considering she last saw it in December, I would really hope so. Theresea Niermeyer wrote me:

I never felt that the situation was really resolved, but it raised question about restraints and expectations of women in society. It also raised the question of who imposes these expectations... is it women just doing it to each other?

I was happy to know that my piece raised questions about who imposes the expectations, and that the situation was never fully resolved, because in reality, the “situation,” or the systems constructed within our society are not actually resolved, but constantly changing.

While I received really great feedback, I am extremely aware of the fact that each section I made in the piece could probably develop into its own evening length piece. I am proud of the work I made, but if I were to continue on with this work, I would like to grow it into a much longer and expanded work. I realize that this is a good thing, because I have planted the seeds for future projects and revisions of this draft.

I could write an entire novel about all of the things I learned through this process. I am most excited by my learning how to draw out qualities of dancers by articulating these qualities through imagery, demonstration and word choice. Alice for example, is the most insanely beautiful controlled dancer in the entire world. The fact that I got her to reverb her head like a bobble head makes me steep with pride. I had to try many different methods to get her there; I eventually just told her to “stop working so hard.” It was so exciting to see that change in Alice. I thought about my dancers each individually and carefully considered about how to play up each of their strengths. It almost felt like cheating, because I exploited all of their individual talents to make myself look good! Alice has a very piercing, understated focus, Kelly has an amazing stage presence and emotional depth, and Anna has incredible articulated spinal movement. I feel like I am the luckiest choreographer in the world, because I literally had a rock star cast of dancers who never questioned me, even when I was floating around in the confused-creative process state. They always executed everything fully, and were crazy patient with me as I stumbled around while attempting to trouble shoot all of my technological difficulties. If I

choreograph again, I definitely want to make “is a nice person,” one of my first priorities in a dancer I chose to work with.

Throughout this year, I also learned to trust the terrifying place that is the creative process. I was never fully confident I knew what I was doing (not that I am now confident I know what I am doing), but even so, I learned that even within the “uh oh,” phase, all I could do is just keep working on the work. Oded assured me that it would come together, and miraculously it did. I felt like I was in a relationship with my senior project; whenever it was not going well I was not happy, and vice versa. I had to learn when to let go and turn my brain off from incessantly thinking about it, because otherwise I would go crazy.

My final “product” was not too different from what I originally proposed to do. In my Undergraduate Research Scholarship Proposal I wrote,

I am using my experiences in Africa as the starting point to this progression. The “end product,” will be a dance that I choreograph. While the dance that I make is important, the significance of this project is really in the process and research I gather along the way. As an artist, I truly believe that creation is about the process. The arts are an incredibly powerful way to communicate about social issues, and I want to draw upon my own experiences to create a work of art that speaks to people and makes them question their own identity in our society.

Remarkably so, I think I was able to accomplish just that. I began my rehearsal process while I was in Burkina Faso, and allowed the process and gathered personal research influence the work. I had no idea that I was going to use pulleys and ropes to make a puppet dance, but I granted myself the freedom to follow my instinct and really explore the ideas that arose during rehearsal.

As strenuous as it was, I am so thankful that I had to spend an entire school year working on this one project. I feel like I have developed an artistic voice that I always knew was there, but never really got to actualize. I am excited to continue to make work, and I am grateful for all of the people that helped guide me and challenge me along the way. A few days after the Spring Festival was over I received a long text from my dad that praised my hard work. At the end he wrote, “You started as a dancer and now you are an artist. Wow.” This was the most rewarding feedback I received, because my dad acknowledged how much I have grown and developed as a person over the past four years in this department.

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